



## CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL

### Why we need to respond more urgently

*By David Atkinson*

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#### 1. Preface: beyond denial and apathy

One of the most notable omissions from the discussions and debates that have taken place in the run-up to the 2015 General Election has been any focus on environmental justice, climate change and global warming. It is as if there is a spirit of denial or apathy in the air. Yet by any measure this is one of the most urgent challenges facing our country, and indeed the world, right now.

In recent years, churches in different parts of the world have started responding practically and theologically to the alarming picture being presented to us by climate science. That is encouraging. But as David Atkinson points out in this timely paper, published also by Operation Noah (<http://operationnoah.org/resources/climate-change-gospel/>), there is a need for much more action.

The recent decision of the Church of England to divest from the most polluting fossil fuel companies, following considerable pressure and the example of Quakers and others, is another sign of moves in the right direction. Care for the earth, which is God's gift, should be a primary concern for Christians, people of other faiths, and everyone of good faith.

Politicians need to be persuaded to act more decisively by the example of people across civil society. At present climate and environmental concerns are still seen by too many in positions of political influence as 'minority issues' or 'for those interested in that sort of thing' – something that someone else should be attending to.

This could not be further from the truth of the situation we face. Environmental concerns should shape and inform everything else we do, particularly in the area of economy and industry. Now is not the time to be letting up or feeling satisfied. Even countries that have set comparatively better carbon emission reduction targets, like Scotland, are still not doing nearly enough measured by what the experts are saying and warning us of.

Here is a real opportunity for Christians and others to lead by good example. Climate change may have been ignored during the election. It must not be overlooked by those who have been elected. If it is not to be, that is up to us.

Meanwhile, the message of this excellent paper by Bishop David Atkinson is that concern for the planet is not a Christian 'add-on', but intrinsic to a credible understanding of the Gospel today.

*(Simon Barrow, co-director of Ekklesia).*

## 2. An urgent call to action for the churches

Why are we in the Christian Church still so slow in responding to the most important moral issue of our generation: climate change? If the climate scientists are right, and there is a huge majority agreement in the latest report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,<sup>1</sup> much of the earth could be uninhabitable for humans in 100 years' time, and the world my grandchildren inherit could be very different from today's world, and a much more painful place to live in. And yet the large majority of Christian people are carrying on as though business is as usual.

Of course, I am not being quite fair. There have been huge numbers of Christian initiatives, many of which I outlined in my 2008 book *Renewing the Face of the Earth*<sup>2</sup> – and since then a great deal more has happened. The Church in South Africa produced a fine report.<sup>3</sup> In the UK the ecumenical study *Hope*

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<sup>1</sup> IPCC Fifth Assessment Report, September 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Canterbury Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *Climate Change: a challenge to the churches in South Africa*, South African Council of Churches, 2009.

*in God's Future*<sup>4</sup> was published; Christian Aid, CAFOD, Tearfund, Green Christian (formerly Christian Ecology Link), A Rocha, John Ray Initiative and others have all made substantial contributions. Operation Noah launched a paper, '*Climate change and the purposes of God*' (that has become known as the 'Ash Wednesday Declaration') in 2012, signed by Archbishops Desmond Tutu, Rowan Williams and Barry Morgan as well as a number of other UK Church leaders from Baptist, Roman Catholic, Methodist, URC, evangelical and Orthodox Churches.

Many dioceses in my Church (the Church of England) have done very good things: environmental policies are in place; church schools are working at exciting environmental initiatives; solar panels are appearing on some church roofs; there have been diocesan debates about disinvestment from fossil fuel extraction; and the 'Shrinking the Footprint' campaign is encouraging churches and related buildings to reduce their use of carbon.

But a large number, indeed I suspect the majority, of Christian people do not read the Church reports, have not heard of 'Shrinking the Footprint', regard environmental concern as a nice hobby if you like that sort of thing, and wish to be left alone. I know of one diocese where a group was set up to produce an environmental policy – which it did, and which was unanimously approved by the Diocesan Synod – only for it to sit for nearly a year in the diocesan office before being circulated to parishes. It was just not seen as a priority. In a discussion between some seaside parishes and the local authority about coastal erosion, one person was heard to say, 'Well, it won't happen in my lifetime.'

Some Boards of Finance, when asked to look at how much of their capital is invested in fossil fuel extraction, feel that this is not the time to raise questions about investments. A gentlemanly approach to engagement with oil companies to try to persuade them to commit to more renewable energy some time before 2050 is usually the most that is done. Some 'Green Groups' in local churches are doing a great deal about recycling, car-sharing, saving paper and turning off the lights, but with the carbon emissions of America, India and China growing so fast, they often wonder what is really the point?

We need to step back a bit. Danny Boyle's magnificent opening ceremony for the 2012 London Olympics showed England's green and pleasant land transformed by the Industrial Revolution. There is so much to be grateful to God for in science and technology. I spent some years as a research chemist, and am grateful for all the benefits science and technology have given us.

But one of the things the early industrialists did not know is that by burning fossil fuels – as well as by some industrial agriculture, and by cutting down rainforests - we are putting a blanket around the earth, which is changing the climate. My grandparents did not know this, nor did my father or mother. But we do.

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<sup>4</sup> *Hope in God's Future: Christian Discipleship in the Context of Climate Change*. A report of a joint working group on climate change and theology convened by the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church, 2009.

### 3. Looking at the science <sup>5</sup>

All through the time of human civilisation, the earth has had a relatively stable climate. To go back further, for several hundred thousand years, the average earth surface temperature has gone up and down a bit, in the ice ages and in the warm periods in between, partly because of the earth's axis in relation to the sun, partly because of volcanic activity and so on – and the amount of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) in the atmosphere has gone up and down as well. The highest concentration that atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> reached in 600,000 years was 280 parts per million. However, since the Industrial Revolution, and especially during our lifetimes, that concentration has gone up and up. In 2013 it reached 400 parts per million for the first time. And CO<sub>2</sub> stays in the atmosphere for a very long time – many decades or more.

If we keep putting CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere at this rate, it has been calculated, the average surface temperature of the earth will be likely to go up by 3, 4 or even 6 degrees centigrade. This may not sound much, but when you think that the temperature difference between ice ages and the warm periods in between is only about 6-7 degrees centigrade, we are talking about roughly half an ice age's worth of change in a matter of decades. The earth has never had to adapt so quickly before. And that will create a very unstable climate, especially towards the end of this century. The people most affected will not be in the UK or the USA, but in sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia – people who have done the least to cause the damage, and are the least able to adapt. Science tells us that action to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is urgent.

Some climate disruption is already happening. The sea levels are rising, as people in the Solomon Islands, Bangladesh and the Maldives know. The oceans are becoming more acidic, which affects the growth of coral reefs and plankton, and that in turn affects fish, and the food chain. Some deserts are growing, which means that food and fresh water will become scarcer in some parts of the world. The distribution of bugs and viruses is changing, causing some illnesses to change their patterns. The Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) reports that the rapid loss of species being seen today is between 1,000 and 10,000 times higher than the natural extinction rate.<sup>6</sup> In fact, some people think that we are already in the Sixth Great Extinction – the last one happened about 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs disappeared.

However, this time it is being caused by humans. During 2014 it was reported that summer sea ice in the Arctic may soon disappear for the first time in two million years. As the earth warms, methane trapped in the ocean floor, and in the permafrost in Siberia, is likely to start leaking out – and methane is a much more damaging greenhouse gas than CO<sub>2</sub>.

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<sup>5</sup> Operation Noah's website [www.operationnoah.org](http://www.operationnoah.org) has a summary paper on 'Climate Science'. Of the vast literature on climate science, I have particularly benefited from John Houghton, *Global Warming: the Complete Briefing*, Cambridge, 2009; James Hansen, *Storms of my Grandchildren*, Bloomsbury, 2009; Mark Lynas, *Six Degrees*, Harper, 2008, and *The God Species*, Fourth Estate 2012; Joseph Romm, *Hell and High Water, Morrow*, 2007; Mike Berners-Lee and Duncan Clark, *The Burning Question*, Profile Books, 2013; Anthony Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change*, Polity, 2009; Nicholas Stern, *A Blueprint for a Safer Planet*, Bodley Head, 2009; Michael Northcott, *A Moral Climate*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007, and *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, SPCK, 2014; Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree about Climate Change*, Cambridge, 2009; Michael Northcott and Peter Scott, eds., *Systematic Theology and Climate Change*, Routledge, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> [http://wwf.panda.org/about\\_our\\_earth/biodiversity/biodiversity/](http://wwf.panda.org/about_our_earth/biodiversity/biodiversity/)

Climate scientists agree that, to prevent dangerous climate change, the rise in average surface temperature of the earth needs to be kept below about 2 degrees centigrade – which means we need to make drastic reduction in carbon emissions. As long ago as 2011, climate scientist Kevin Anderson was arguing that even 2 degrees is ‘beyond dangerous’.<sup>7</sup> The point too many people fail to grasp is that what is crucial is the *cumulative* amount of carbon we put into the atmosphere, and therefore the growing concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. It will not do to say ‘we are aiming for an 80% reduction by 2050’, and so think there is really no urgency.

However, the UK Parliamentary Committee on Climate Change argued<sup>8</sup> that in order to have any chance of reaching 80% reduction by 2050, our global emissions need to peak by the year 2020, followed by rapid cuts after that if we are to have a chance of avoiding catastrophic climate change. That’s five or so years away at most.

#### 4. An hour of opportunity?

I suspect that underneath some of the lack of urgency among Christians, is a belief that environmental concern, or ‘creation care’ if you prefer, is not really a Christian priority. It is not central to the gospel of Jesus Christ, though it is a worthy thing to do if you have time. So we may have an ‘Environment Sunday’ once a year to ‘do our bit’. Or maybe an extra hour on the already overloaded theological college curriculum to discuss climate change. Perhaps we may try to get the idea of solar panels on our church roof past the Diocesan Advisory Committee, the Victorian Society, the Heritage Lottery Fund, and the local brigadier who lives next to the church. But, please, with endless diocesan initiatives for mission, with assemblies to take in the church school, with a couple of funerals a week, with trying to keep alive our Partnership Link with an overseas diocese, with constant pressure to up our diocesan quota, and with dwindling numbers in the congregation, please do not ask us to do any more!

In response, I would claim that the affirmation we make when reciting the Creed – ‘God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth’ – is foundational for the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. As the psalmist puts it, ‘the earth is the Lord’s’ (Psalm 24:1); all we have – life and the means of life – comes to us as gift of God’s love; care for God’s creation is an essential and vitally important dimension of our Christian discipleship and mission in response to God’s love. And it is indeed joyous and creative. However, the World Council of Churches was right to say,

*Creation has been misused and we face threats to the balance of life, a growing ecological crisis and the effects of climate change. These are signs of our disordered relations with God, with one another and with creation, and we confess that they dishonour God’s gift of life.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Kevin Anderson’s article based on a presentation at the UK DFID July 2011: ‘Climate change going beyond dangerous’, published in *Development Dialogue Sept 2012*; and an academic paper written with Alice Bows, ‘Beyond ‘dangerous’ climate change: emission scenarios for a new world’, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* vol. 269, 13 January 2011.

<sup>8</sup> UK Parliamentary Committee on Climate Change, Fourth Carbon Budget Review, November 2013.

<sup>9</sup> World Council of Churches, 10th Assembly, November 2013, para.2

I believe that Christian people ought to be leading players in debates and in taking action about climate change. Because what ultimately matters is not scientific knowledge, or technology, or a change to our economic system – vitally important though all those are. What matters is how we see ourselves in God’s world, how we humans relate to the rest of God’s creation. It is about what makes for human flourishing and the wellbeing of all God’s creation, on which our life depends. This is about morality, and spirituality.

I referred to the 2012 Operation Noah ‘Ash Wednesday Declaration’ (*Climate change and the purposes of God*). Regarding this, Professor Mary Grey commented: ‘For Christians, the themes of this statement – joy, repentance, hope, justice and so on – are not optional: they are at the heart of our identity as Church. We will encounter them in the form of a question when we face God’s judgment: “*What did you do to cherish my creation in its hour of danger?*”’

Hour of danger? It could also be an hour of opportunity. Just suppose we had a world in which we were not all trying to consume as much as we could to keep GDP growing and growing as though there were no boundaries; or in which we could significantly reduce our dependency on coal, oil and gas, and satisfy our energy needs in other ways. We would not need to extract so many resources from the earth, so the earth would be more sustainable. The air would be cleaner so we could breathe more easily. The water would be fresher and there would not be wars fought over clean water. Land would be more fertile so our food security would be stronger; people living in London, New York or Shanghai – not to mention the Solomon Islands – would not be afraid that their cities would flood. We could build a cleaner, healthier, safer and better-fed world that is more just, with less poverty, and less anxiety about what the future will hold. We are told that is within our reach, but the time available to us is diminishing.

## 5. God–Humanity–Earth

I believe that a significant part of our problem is that we have lost the understanding that ‘the earth is the Lord’s’, and with it the biblical sense that there is a life-giving triangle of relationships between God, the earth and humanity: that we humans are part of Nature and dependent on Nature for our wellbeing, but that we also have responsibility under God to care for God’s creation on God’s behalf.

We can find the triangle of relationships in the Hebrew Bible: God–Israel–the land; a triangle which then becomes a symbol of the more basic ‘cosmic covenant’<sup>10</sup> between God, humanity and the earth. It is implicit in the first chapter of the Bible when, after the emergence of all other creatures, humanity is created to be ‘the image of God’. It is explicit in the story of Noah and the rainbow: ‘God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you”’ (Genesis 9:12).

The cosmic covenant (God–Humanity–Earth) features in the writings of theologians such as Irenaeus and Augustine, and with Francis of Assisi. But it has been lost, and this lies behind our contemporary crisis of not knowing who we are in relation either to God or to nature, and the development of what

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<sup>10</sup> cf. Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant*, Sheed & Ward, 1992.

Naomi Klein<sup>11</sup> calls ‘extractivism’ – a dominance-based relationship in which we humans place ourselves above the earth’s ecosystems and believe we can – indeed must – control and exploit the earth as if it were an inanimate machine.

Some people have taken the Genesis language of ‘dominion’ and ‘subdue’ (Genesis 1:28) to mean ‘exploit as much as you like, without regard for the welfare of other creatures’. Sadly this has sometimes been true of Christians. Many environmentalists are cautious of – indeed, opposed to – the Christian Church because they assume this is what Christians believe. So we need to be very careful with this language.

In fact, as Richard Bauckham argues,<sup>12</sup> until the rise of modern science, most Christians did *not* believe that this verse meant that human beings should have total control over the whole world. It was the growth of modern science and technology in the seventeenth century – though often pioneered by Christian people, and having brought much blessing to the world – that led at the same time to the ‘disenchantment’ of nature and the (wrong) belief that science was about forcing nature to yield her secrets to our human power of exploration.

Edinburgh-based theologian Michael Northcott, in his book *A Political Theology of Climate Change*,<sup>13</sup> talks about the ‘separations’, or ‘pulling apart’ that started with Francis Bacon’s seventeenth-century mechanistic model of nature. God is separated from the world: matter becomes separated from mind and spirit; nature from culture; science from ethics; facts from values.<sup>14</sup> Carolyn Merchant writes of *The Death of Nature*.<sup>15</sup> Philip Sherrard called his book *The Rape of Man and Nature*.<sup>16</sup> Bill McKibben wrote *The End of Nature*,<sup>17</sup> and Alister McGrath has called for *The Re-enchantment of Nature*.<sup>18</sup>

What is at issue here is the fracture of the triangle of relationships between God, humanity and the earth, and so the loss of the Christian understanding of humanity serving under God in the care of the world. To pick up a phrase from John Donne’s sad reflection on what he thought the new science of his day had produced, ‘Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone.’<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, Allen Lane, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, DLT, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, SPCK, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Dupré puts the main damage earlier, at the end of the medieval period, when what he calls the ‘orthodox synthesis’ began to come apart – that is the triangle of relationships between God, humanity and the earth breaks apart (*Passage to Modernity*, Yale, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, Harper and Row, 1980.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Sherrard, *The Rape of Man and Nature*, Golgonooza, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*, Bloomsbury, 1989/2003; cf. also McKibben, *Eaarth*, St Martin’s Griffin, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Re-enchantment of Nature*, Hodder, 2002. Many environmentalists are ‘enchanted’ with nature, and are at a loss to understand why this view seems not to be shared by Christians.

<sup>19</sup> ‘And new philosophy calls all in doubt, / The element of fire is quite put out, / The sun is lost, and th’earth, and no man’s wit, / Can well direct him where to look for it. / And freely men confess that this world’s spent, / When in the planets and the firmament / They seek so many new; they see that this / Is crumbled out again to his atomies. / ’Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone, / All just supply, and all relation; / Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot’, John Donne, *An Anatomy of the World, The First Anniversary*. It is perhaps worth reflecting that in the New Testament, the concepts of throwing apart, dividing, separating, setting at variance, are covered by the word ‘*diabolos*’. The ministry of Jesus, by contrast, is predominantly healing, gathering up fragments, restoring, putting back together.

Climate change is one illustration of the disintegration that results from displacing God from the relationship of God, humanity and earth – what Thomas Torrance calls ‘The Eclipse of God’.<sup>20</sup> Climate change, in James Lovelock’s colourful metaphor, is ‘Gaia’s Revenge’.<sup>21</sup>

Can Christian theology and Christian discipleship and mission contribute to a repair of the disjunction between God, humanity and earth? Can body be reconciled with spirit, nature with culture, science with ethics? Can coherence be restored? Can humanity again exercise our responsibility as God’s image-bearers towards creation?

## 6. Questions for Christians

Climate change undoubtedly brings a lot of questions for Christians:

- What sort of trust should we place in technology; are we secretly hoping that a technical fix will be the answer?
- What are our responsibilities to the parts of the world that are poorer and have done little to cause the damage to our atmosphere, and are the least able to adapt?
- How do we let future generations speak to us of their needs? (It is *our* carbon emissions that will still be around in *their* world.)
- Why do we keep fostering the illusion that growth in GDP is the most important thing?
- Why do we maintain our dependence on fossil fuels, when we know that burning fossil fuels – which currently energise the industrial world and underpin our GDP – results in a major cause of damage to the planet? Why do we (why does the Government) try to keep two contrary views in mind: cutting carbon emissions on the one hand, and maximising fossil fuel extraction on the other?
- What are we to do about the unfair trade rules that frequently hamper attempts to curb dependence on fossil fuels?
- How do we handle our fears, vulnerabilities and anxieties about the future?
- Why do we seem so ready to downplay, deny or displace the urgency of climate change?<sup>22</sup>

These are all, at base, moral and spiritual questions. But underneath all these is a prior question, on which I want to concentrate: what should be our human relationship to the rest of the created order? To explore this question, I am going – perhaps surprisingly – to take some themes from the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel.

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<sup>20</sup> T. F. Torrance, *God and Rationality*, OUP, 1971.

<sup>21</sup> James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia*, Allen Lane, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> cf. George Marshall, *Don’t Even Think About It: Why our brains are wired to ignore climate change*, Bloomsbury, 2013.



## 7. Looking at St John's Gospel: dialogues

I say surprisingly, because of the Fourth Gospel's rather ambiguous approach to the word 'cosmos'.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes John means the world God loves; sometimes the world of all people; sometimes the world in the sense of 'worldliness' which needs to be resisted and 'overcome'. In what follows I shall use some of the Prologue's themes as 'pegs' on which to hang my own reflections.

### a) God's joy: 'In the beginning ...' (John 1:1)

We have heard 'In the beginning ...' before, in the first creation story in Genesis 1 which shows the wonderful pattern of God's world, six days leading to a seventh – all creation leading towards worship – and humanity in God's image as the last of a long line of creatures made for God's enjoyment. Other species matter to God: they are not simply there for their usefulness to us. This is the world of which God said, 'This is good!' God's creation reflects God's goodness: it is good – that is, 'fit for purpose'.

The poet who wrote Psalm 104 speaks of God's wisdom and joy: 'O Lord how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures' (Psalm 104:24). Then we hear of asses, birds, cattle, storks, wild goats, coney, young lions, sea monsters: 'these all look to you to give them their food in due season'. God even seems to enjoy the play of Leviathan, the sea monster (v. 26). And then again, a dominant note of joy: 'May the Lord rejoice in his works' (v.31).

As yet another poet writes, 'The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made' (Psalm 145:9).

And at the end of the Book of Job, God says to Job: 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when all the morning stars sang together, and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?' (Job 38:4-7).

The psalmist who speaks of God's joy goes on to speak of his own: 'I rejoice in the Lord' (Psalm 104:34).

This suggests that our first word in a theology of nature should be that of humble and joyous gratitude: joy in what God has made; joy in God's gift. For all that we have, life and the means of life, comes to us

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Santmire's classic study of ecology in Christian tradition, *The Travail of Nature*, Fortress Press, 1985, identifies two major motifs: he contrasts the 'ecological' motif of 'nature-affirming' metaphors in the theology of Irenaeus, later Augustine, Francis of Assisi, parts of Calvin and so on, with what he calls the 'spiritual motif' of those whose understanding of the spiritual journey towards God was a journey *away from* nature. Santmire suggests that the Fourth Gospel falls clearly into the latter category. I want to argue that Santmire is not wholly correct – at least in relation to the Prologue. This is not the place for discussion about the source of the Fourth Gospel, except to say that I believe it arose within a Jewish Diaspora Hellenistic context (perhaps Ephesus), from what C. H. Dodd called 'the Community of the Beloved Disciple', and what David Rensberger (*Overcoming the World*, SPCK, 1988) describes as 'an alienated and oppressed community'. The message is one of testimony about the Messiah, and is against the world's rejection of God and God's love, and is positively about the calling to social justice and to a confrontation with the world's hatred seen as violence and greed, both personal and institutional. The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel is one of the latest parts of the New Testament, derived from reflections on the experience of the risen Jesus, and on the stories circulating about him in the early Christian communities.

as gift: gift, we may want to say, of God's goodness, generosity and love, for 'God so loved the world' (John 3:16).

Genesis 1 also makes clear that we humans are part of the rest of nature or, as we would say, part of the whole evolved creation, and therefore dependent on God for life, and for wellbeing. Our theology, our discipleship, our ethics, our mission in the light of climate change, must therefore be one of proper dependence, of createdness, not of an assumed autonomy. Yet we human beings are also described as made, male and female, to be 'the image of God'. The language of 'image' is of royal service: humanity charged with particular responsibility under God for the cultivation, care and protection of all God's creation. It is sometimes said that because human beings are the cause of the damage to the natural environment, it is human beings who can solve it. While we most certainly do have a responsibility under God for creation care, the preservation or restoration of creation cannot simply be a human task if the creation is continuously created and upheld and sustained by God, and will ultimately be redeemed. Creation or, to use a phrase of Colin Gunton's,<sup>24</sup> 'God's project' of which we are one part, is in process of being made perfect .

### **b) So what is our human responsibility?**

As several writers have emphasised, the pattern of Genesis 1 is the pattern of the Temple,<sup>25</sup> and the whole cosmos can be understood as God's temple, or what Calvin<sup>26</sup> called the 'theatre of God's glory'. Humanity, God's image-bearer, is then seen as God's priest – part of the created order, and yet with a responsibility under God to represent God in relation to creation – namely, a vocation reflecting something of God's care for all creation, encouraging biodiversity and rejoicing in creation's worship. The six days lead to Sabbath, which is about the rhythm of the days of the week; the rhythm of work and rest – a reminder that there is more to life than working and making money; a reminder of spiritual values; a reminder that the earth itself needs its rhythm of life in order to be replenished and sustained. And Sabbath is about joy: a good Sabbath leads to 'delight in the Lord' (Isaiah 58:14). Jesus often used the Sabbath for the welfare of his fellow human beings: teaching, feeding and healing. Sabbath is about reflection on the needs of others. Sabbath is about worship. Humanity as God's priest is there to give a voice for the whole creation to sing the Creator's praise.

### **c) Word and Wisdom: 'All things came into being through him' (John 1:3)**

John's Gospel speaks about Logos (translated 'The Word'), which in the first instance has resonance with 'The Word of the Lord' in the Old Testament. In fact, when some of the rabbis quoted the words 'In the beginning', they were referring to Torah – God's Fatherly instruction/law to God's people. But 'Logos' also has resonance with contemporary Stoic thought in which it means a sense of law-like rational order and structure in the universe. So I think William Temple was right to say<sup>27</sup> that Logos is 'the Word of the

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<sup>24</sup> Colin Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, Paternoster, 1992; cf. *The Triune Creator*, Eerdmans, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Cf e.g. Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology*, SPCK, 2004. Day One represents the Holy of holies; heaven and earth together. The veil of the Temple represents the second day with the separation of the heaven and the earth. Subsequent days give us the seven-branched candlestick (sun, moon and five planets); the table of bread (vegetation); the altar of sacrifice (the animal kingdom); and finally the priest (humanity as male and female).

<sup>26</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.6.2.

<sup>27</sup> W. Temple, *Readings in St John's Gospel*, Macmillan, 1950, comment on John 1:1.

Lord by which the heavens were made. It is also the Rational Principle that gives unity and significance to all existing things.<sup>28</sup>

However, and I think this is important in the Fourth Gospel, Logos has a particular resonance also with the Hebrew idea of 'Wisdom', such as we find in the Books of Proverbs, Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. The wisdom of the Book of Proverbs is wonderfully free from religion. No priests or scribes; no sacrifices or rituals. Instead, a farrago of pithy sayings about relationships and money, wine and work, sex and death, animals, gossip, justice, royalty, language and lethargy, which Derek Kidner<sup>29</sup> once called 'godliness in working clothes'. But behind the moral wisdom of the sayings of Proverbs lies a view of the world in which God's Wisdom can be discerned. She is there with God in the beginning. 'I was there beside him, like master worker; and I was daily his delight' (Proverbs 8:30). Wisdom's world is one of discovery and excitement.

#### **d) The Mediator**

Much of the Fourth Gospel carries echoes of Wisdom writings. When the Gospel talks about God's Word, there is also present the thought of God's Wisdom – presented in the Hebrew Bible as the mediator between God the Creator and the created world. So the Bible neither takes us to pantheism, in which nature is identified with God, nor to the deism that has such a lofty view of God's transcendence that God is lifted out of any concern with ordinary material things, nor to the sort of super-spirituality which detaches us from the earth and our earthiness. Anne Primavesi's book *Exploring Earthiness*<sup>30</sup> suggests that if we see ourselves as *of the earth*, rather than think the earth *exists for us*, our whole perspective is radically changed. In the context of climate change, one crucial task is a transformation of our habits of thinking.

The Fourth Gospel points us to Wisdom, the Mediator. It is the Mediator who is in mind when the majestic Christological hymn in Colossians 1:15-20 refers to Jesus Christ, the image of God who embodies God's Wisdom:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and earth were created ... in him all things hold together ... through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things ... by making peace through the blood of his cross.*<sup>31</sup>

Or as the writer to the Ephesians put it:

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<sup>28</sup> In fact, God's Word in this context seems to include the concepts of both order and contingency, which we now know to be among the basic assumptions of physical science.

<sup>29</sup> Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Tyndale Press, 1964.

<sup>30</sup> Anne Primavesi, *Exploring Earthiness*, Cascade, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> In 1961, Joseph Sittler spoke from this text in his address to the World Council of Churches. He was talking about Christian unity. It is the vision of the cosmic Christ in whom all things hold together that provides Sittler with what he calls a 'life-affirming Christology of nature'. *The triad of God, humanity and nature*, is the basis, he says, for our calling to unity with one another and with all creation.

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... with all wisdom and insight he has made known the mystery of his will ... to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Ephesians 1:3-10)*

Wisdom is She in whom 'all things hold together'. It is Wisdom's way that leads us back to coherence.

'Holding together' points us to mutual interdependence. Our human life and flourishing is inextricably bound up not only with our relationship with God, but also with the wellbeing of the planet, on which we depend for food, sustenance, health, energy and so on. This is why the Fifth Mark of Mission for the Anglican Consultative Council is: 'To safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.'<sup>32</sup>

I think we urgently need to recover a sense that 'the earth is the Lord's', and our calling to live within God's will and God's way of Wisdom. We need to recover a sense of mutual interdependence within creation – which, I shall argue, for us means justice, generosity and restraint.

#### **e) Word and Spirit: 'In him was life' (John 1:4)**

Life in the Bible is often linked to the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life. Here is God 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28).

Where Genesis 1 speaks of creation by Word and Spirit (God's commanding Word: 'Let there be'; God's animating Spirit: 'the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters'), elsewhere God's Spirit is described as the animating life of the divine Wisdom. 'The spirit of the Lord has filled the world, and that which holds all things together knows what is said' (Wisdom of Solomon 1:7). The great second-century theologian Irenaeus<sup>33</sup> builds on this when he says that God creates 'with two hands': the Son and the Spirit, the Word and the Wisdom.

We may be given a clue to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in Genesis 2:2. Some commentators suggest that when God 'rested' from work, God was preparing the way for future blessing and eventually for the perfection of all creation. Abraham Kuyper offers this translation: 'God rested from all his work which he had created to make it perfect.' He comments: 'Thus to lead the creature to its destiny, to cause it to develop according to its nature, to make it perfect, is the proper work of the Holy Spirit.'<sup>34</sup> If the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, leads the whole creation to its destiny, how much more the

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<sup>32</sup> The Stockholm scientist Johan Rockstrom introduced the phrase 'planetary boundaries'. 'A safe and just space for humanity', depends on us not exceeding 'planetary boundaries' – that is not living beyond the capacity of the planet to sustain 9 billion people. We exceed planetary boundaries by polluting our fresh water, using too much nitrogen and phosphorus in our fertilisers, polluting the atmosphere, letting the oceans become too acidic, losing biodiversity and failing to tackle climate change. And all of this is complicated by the fact that the world's population is currently growing at the rate of a city the size of Birmingham every five days.

<sup>33</sup> Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 4.20.1: 'It was not angels who made us ... nor anyone else, except the Word of the Lord, nor any power remotely distant from the Father of all things. For God did not stand in need of these ... as if He did not possess His own hands. For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things.'

<sup>34</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, Eerdmans, 1900, 1975. p.21.

humanity in which God's Spirit dwells. 'The Spirit of God has made me' says Job (33:4), 'and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.' The Psalmist refers to all God's other creatures when he writes: 'when you send forth your Spirit they are created' (Psalm 104:30).<sup>35</sup>

In summary so far, I believe we need to recover a theology of the Holy Trinity, which points to God the Father, source of all things in God's creative love; God the Son, the Word and the Wisdom in whom we and all creation are held together; and God the Spirit, the Giver of Life, the energy of God's will and purpose, who leads all creation towards its perfection. 'From him and through him and to him are all things.'<sup>36</sup> We need to hold together God's transcendent majesty with God's immanent presence, power and compassion. It is Wisdom's way which will enable us to find again the coherence of the integrated triad: God, humanity and the earth. Then we might rediscover our human role as God's image-bearers: our interdependence with all other creatures, and as having the consciousness and so the responsibility under God to care for them.

**f) World without God:** *'The world was made through him, yet the world knew him not' (John 1:10)*

The world of God's good creation, fit for purpose, has become a 'world' which does not know God, a world from which God has been eclipsed. It is possible to be made by God, and yet live without acknowledging God; to be alive in God's world but not be alive to God. If we look back into the Hebrew Bible we find a number of variations on this theme.

In the enigmatic book of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth, the Preacher, keeps looking down at the frustration of it all from the perspective of life 'under the sun'. There is not much about God in his book, though the Creator gets a mention in the very last chapter: 'Remember your Creator in the days of your youth' (Ecclesiastes 12:1). Why? Because you are getting old and will die, just as this whole creation is dying. But much of the book is a depiction of a world without reference to God, a world of waste and frustration. The author does not engage with the cruelty and apparent wastefulness of the evolutionary process. But he gets close. 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity': all is ephemeral, elusive, short-lived – like the wind. What comes around goes around. Everything gets recycled in some way. What is the point of it all?

And yet there are a couple of glimpses of hope in which the author looks beyond the frustrations of life 'under the sun' to something deeper, something more profound, even more real: life 'under heaven'. God is in heaven, and you are upon earth (Ecclesiastes 5:2), he says. Yet, 'he has put eternity into man's minds' (Ecclesiastes 3:11). That is why the young man is to remember his Creator, and why, eventually, Qoheleth ends in the way he does: 'The end of the matter: all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments: for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment' (Ecclesiastes 12:14). In other words, even though everything looks to us futile and ephemeral, and as though nothing has meaning under the sun, and that nothing ultimately matters at all, the end is this,

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<sup>35</sup> The animating Spirit of Life is also the giver of gifts and talents. 'The Lord spoke to Moses: See I have called by name Bezalel ... I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft' (Exodus 31:2-5). Artistic, scientific and technological creativity are depicted in this paragraph as gifts of the divine spirit.

<sup>36</sup> Romans 11:36.

which we can receive as good news: everything matters! God judges every deed – so fear God and keep his commandments.

Genesis chapters 2 and 3 give us a further dimension. The shift from God's garden of delight in Genesis chapter 2 to the sphere of broken relationships – between humanity and their environment, man and woman, humanity and God in Genesis chapter 3 – points up the ambiguity of the world as we know it. Beauty and brokenness, life and death. Humanity, the writer seems to be saying, is wanting to live beyond God-given boundaries – to be as God (as the serpent put it). The Genesis story points us to *moral* boundaries within which life can flourish, as well as the 'environmental boundaries' of God's garden.

The prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem in the eighth century BC called living beyond God-given boundaries 'transgression'. He uses climate language to illustrate the results of human sinfulness.

*The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. (Isaiah 24:4-5)*

Isaiah's near contemporary, Hosea in Israel, said much the same:

*There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land ... Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing. (Hosea 4:2-3)*

'Gaia's Revenge' is here depicted as God's judgment on human sin.

The prophet Amos, writing just before Hosea in Israel, details some of the nation's transgression, highlighting:

(i) the growing gap between the rich and the poor, and the powerlessness of poverty. The social and political leaders were prey to acquisitiveness and were living in luxury (3:15; 6:4-6), leading to the neglect and oppression of the poor (5:11f.). People had become commodities in big business: 'They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals – they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way (2:6ff.).

(ii) social institutions promoting injustice. The social system was preventing aid reaching those who needed it. There was dishonesty in the place where justice should be administered. Whereas they should 'establish justice in the gate' (5:15), it was there that the needy were 'pushed aside' (5:12). 'You have turned justice into poison, and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood (6:12ff.). 'Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream (5:24).

(iii) the religious institutions that had become politicised. Even Bethel, the holy shrine, had become a 'sanctuary for the king' (7:13).

Amos speaks words of divine judgment against the nation's sin and injustice, at times seeing environmental devastation as a consequence of, and divine judgment on, human sin. For him ecology and economy belong together:

*I withheld the rain from you ... I struck you with blight and mildew; I laid waste your gardens and your vineyards; the locust devoured your fig trees; yet you did not return to me, says the Lord. (Amos 4:7,9f.)*

The nation's soul was sick, which prompts the prophetic cry: 'Seek good and not evil!' (5:14); 'Seek the Lord and live! (5:6).

### **g) Our stories**

It is not only Qoheleth, Isaiah and Amos who know what it means to live in God's world without God. Many of the stories we tell each other about our world, and about climate change, illustrate the displacement of God from our thinking: God, who has put eternity into our minds, is – at least in the rich West – no longer really part of the story. Instead of the life-giving triangle of relationships between God, humanity and the earth, after 'the eclipse of God' we, too, have tended to live without acknowledging God and to think only of our relationship to the earth without reference to God, and so have inevitably got it wrong.

### **h) There is a story about management and control**

From Francis Bacon onwards there is a view of nature as a mechanism that we can control for our own benefit, what Klein called 'extractivism'. We humans stand over and above the world, which is there for our good. We are the masters, the 'God species' – using the world to provide for all our wants, so we exploit it, and extract it, and damage it without thought for the future. We can manage; by doing the right research, by asking the right questions and pushing the right buttons, we can manipulate nature to yield her secrets, and to produce whatever we want to fulfil all our desires. You get this sort of thing in Nigel Lawson's book about global warming.<sup>37</sup> The message I take from that is: 'the earth is very resilient; technological discovery has always come to our rescue in the past; we can manage the world for our benefit; it makes no economic sense to take any action to change energy policy; there is no need to worry.' How does a Christian respond to such complacency? Does Lawson not too easily let us off the hook with false comfort: we can leave it all to others, and not trouble ourselves.

### **i) At the opposite extreme, there is a story of doom**

We are impotent in the face of Nature's power: look at the tsunamis and Ebola. Nothing we do can make any difference, so let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die – a sort of fatalism. We are simply part of the system. This is not a mechanical but an organic model: we are essentially part of 'nature', which is living, developing and unpredictable. We may say that God's earth is resilient, but we ignore our calling to exercise responsibility for it, and fail to acknowledge that the decisions we make have a great effect on God's earth for good or bad.

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<sup>37</sup> Nigel Lawson, *An Appeal to Reason*, Duckworth, 2008, 2009.

Alternatively, we think of the earth system as very fragile and sensitive to climate change; we are seriously damaging the environment: Be afraid – be very afraid. In his book about population trends, *Ten Billion*, Stephen Emmott's verdict<sup>38</sup> is, 'I think we're fxxxxd.' How does a Christian respond to fatalism or to overwhelming despair?

### **j) There is a story about greed**

Michael Northcott has a comment<sup>39</sup> on the greedy consumption which is a major driver of climate change: Nature 'calls time on the freedom of the human species to continue to raid the planet for resources to sustain industrial civilization', while there is a struggle for access to diminishing food and water resources. Naomi Klein's book *This Changes Everything* is subtitled *Capitalism versus the climate*. She argues that we now have to choose either the attempt to avert environmental catastrophe or to continue with the illusion of limitless economic growth. 'Climate change detonates the ideological scaffolding', she argues, on which our contemporary economic and political ideology rests.

In the Mayor of London's Margaret Thatcher Lecture (2013) – even allowing for his rhetorical flourish – Boris Johnson seemed to celebrate greed: 'I don't believe economic equality is possible. Indeed, some measure of inequality is essential for the spirit of envy and keeping up with the Joneses that is, like greed, a valuable spur to economic activity.' We are, he implied, a 'market-led' economy in which something called 'The Market' rules; finance trumps every other consideration; everything, including the environment, becomes a commodity to be desired, or given a price tag. Lesslie Newbigin<sup>40</sup> gave his response to that sort of idolatry:

*When the free market is made into an absolute; outside of rational control in the light of ethical principles, it becomes a power that enslaves human beings ... The idea that if economic life is detached from all moral consideration and left to operate by its own laws all will be well, is simply an abdication of human responsibility ... If Christ's sovereignty is not recognized in the world of economics, then demonic powers take control.*

The world of God's good creation becomes a 'world' without God. This is the world of which Jesus speaks in the Fourth Gospel: 'This is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.' (John 3:19). But it was also of this world that later in the Gospel Jesus says to his followers: 'Take courage! I have conquered the world' (John 16:33).

### **k) Bearing witness to truth: 'the true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world' (John 1:7-9)**

John's Gospel gives us a different story, the story of God's relationship to the rest of 'the world' through Jesus Christ, the 'light of the world', the 'image of the invisible God'. The Gospel gives us a different way

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen Emmott, *10 Billion*, Penguin, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, SPCK, 2014, p.167.

<sup>40</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*, SPCK, 1991, p.77.



of looking at our relationship to the world in categories that are not mechanical or merely organic, but personal, relational and covenantal:

- instead of management: a story of interdependence, cooperation and fellowship
- instead of despair: a story of compassionate love and mercy leading to hope
- instead of greed: a story of generosity and of self-giving restraint and service

In summary, the Gospel points us to Jesus Christ who embodies the Wisdom of God, and it directs us to love. God so loved the world; Christ loved his own to the end; he gave us the commandment to love. Jose Miranda's work on John's Gospel<sup>41</sup> reminds us that love, in John, is primarily love of the deprived, the poor, the needy. He draws on the first Letter of John to identify love with justice: 'If a man has enough to live on, and yet when he sees his brother in need, shuts up his heart against him, how can it be said that the love of God dwells in him? My children, love must not be a matter of words or talk; it must be genuine, and show itself in action' (1 John 3:17-18). 'The defining characteristic of the God of the Bible is the fact that he cannot be known or loved directly; rather, to love God and to know him means to love one's neighbor and to do one's neighbor justice.'<sup>42</sup> It is love, for God and his people and his earth that will motivate transformative action for renewal. So in a world of climate change, we take from this that 'living in the light' includes bringing the environmental agenda and the developmental agenda together. We are talking of what Christian Aid calls 'climate justice'. We are faced with a reframing of all our values and desires. And that will mean costly discipleship.

Justice is the social and political expression of what Jesus called neighbour-love. Climate change calls us to love and justice for our neighbours – including those overseas and those not yet born. Justice, especially for the poorest and most disadvantaged people, who have done least to cause climate change and are the least able to adapt. That is part of our Christian mission. Justice requires an equitable and sustainable sharing of the rich resources of God's earth, and for many of us this requires the discipleship of restraint. To continue to consume earth's resources at our current rate is not only not sustainable, it is sin.

According to Isaiah, when the Messiah comes, God's Spirit will anoint him (Isaiah 61:1-2) to 'bring good news to the poor ... release to captives ... recovery of sight to the blind ... to let the oppressed go free ... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' Jesus linked Isaiah's prophecy to himself in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). The last reference is to the jubilee year of Leviticus 25, a 'sabbath of complete rest for the land' (Leviticus 25:4), and a regulation that wealth should not accumulate in the hands only of the few. The concept of jubilee links the *economy* of financial practice with the *ecology* of the land's wellbeing. This is one theological support for Naomi Klein's claim that climate change 'detonates the ideological scaffolding' on which contemporary economics, politics and much of the media rest.

As Operation Noah's 'Ash Wednesday Declaration' put it, speaking of justice and love:

*The prophets put economic behaviour at the forefront of their call to justice ... Today, the challenge is to seek a different, sustainable economy, based on the values of human*

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<sup>41</sup> Jose Miranda, *Being and the Messiah*, Orbis Books, 1977.

<sup>42</sup> Miranda, p.137.

*flourishing and the wellbeing of all creation, not on the assumption of unlimited economic growth, overconsumption, exploitative interest and debt.*

*People in poor communities are mostly innocent of any role in causing climate change, whilst the nations that pollute most refuse to accept their responsibilities. Loving our neighbour requires us to reduce our consumption of energy for the sake of Christ, who suffers with those who suffer. To live simply and sustainably contributes significantly to human flourishing ... In the future, Christians may be called to receive into their communities refugees forced to leave their lands through climate change.*

In the light of climate change, how are we to bear witness to the truth of this different gospel story, the Light of Christ? Climate change requires of us a reframing of all our human values and desires. There is urgency about this, too. Christian Aid quotes Nazumul Chowdhury: 'Forget about making poverty history. Climate change will make poverty permanent.'

Former Archbishop Rowan Williams<sup>43</sup> draws on the title of one of Mary Midgely's books, *The Myths We Live By*<sup>44</sup>:

*The church's contribution [to the climate change debate] has to consist not primarily or exclusively in public lobbying, though that is important, but in its showing forth of a different myth.*<sup>45</sup>

Williams elaborates that in terms of the truth of creation's relation with the Creator, and especially the role of human work and thought within that. This, he says, 'is what is exhibited every time the Eucharist is celebrated'. We bear witness through worship, as well as by the discipleship of restraint and the mission of love and justice.

**I) Incarnation:** *'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us ... and we saw his glory' (John 1:14)*

The scientist/philosopher Michael Polanyi<sup>46</sup> depicts reality as multi-levelled, each level with its own mode of interpretation, from physics and chemistry, then biology, psychology, sociology, ethics and theology. Each 'level' depends on, but is not reducible to, lower levels.

The incarnation of Christ then is God's Word, God's Wisdom, becoming flesh right down to the level of our genes. The incarnation is what Thomas Torrance,<sup>47</sup> in a vivid metaphor, calls 'the intersecting vertical coordinate' which gives all the other levels their coherence and meaning.

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<sup>43</sup> Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, Bloomsbury, 2012, ch.14.

<sup>44</sup> Mary Midgley, *The Myths we Live By*, Routledge, 2004.

<sup>45</sup> Myth in the sense, of course, not of fairy tale, but of imaginative narrative or symbol which embodies truth.

<sup>46</sup> e.g. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, Routledge, 1958; *Knowing and Being*, Routledge, 1969.

<sup>47</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and incarnation*, OUP, 1969.

From the God apex of my triangle, God himself becomes immersed in the earth as a human being. In the incarnation of God's Word and Wisdom in Jesus, the triangle of relationships between God, humanity and the earth is restored. Oliver O'Donovan wrote of:

*the message of the incarnation, by which we learn how, through a unique presence of God to his creation, the whole created order is taken up into the fate of this particular representative man at this particular moment of history, on whose one fate turns the redemption of all.*<sup>48</sup>

The incarnation of divine Wisdom brings repair for our cultural splits between body and spirit, nature and culture, science and ethics. If John Donne spoke of 'all coherence gone', the incarnation points to 'coherence restored': God, humanity and earth reconnected.

### **m) Glory**

Incarnation leads to the Wisdom of the cross<sup>49</sup>: 'through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, by making peace through the blood of his cross'. The redemption of the whole of creation is in some way achieved through the cross.

In Margaret Barker's 'Temple theology', 'the blood of the Cross' is the language of the High Priest emerging through the veil with the shed blood of sacrifice to bring cleansing and blessing to the temple: that is, Christ's death is bringing cleansing and blessing to all creation. This is what Allan Galloway<sup>50</sup> and Joseph Sittler call 'cosmic redemption'. Or, to use Colin Gunton's phrase when referring to Irenaeus' teaching that creation is both good and also on the way to perfection, 'creation is a project' which has its origins in the covenant love of God, and goes by way of the cross to the kingdom of God's glory.

In John's Gospel, the phrase: 'we saw his glory' is mostly a reference to the passion, suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. The birth of Jesus is part of the story that leads to Good Friday and Easter. It is through God's own self in Christ experiencing the depths of disintegration, even to death, and triumphing through to new life, that reintegration, new coherence, healing and resurrection are possible, and the vision becomes one of creation restored.<sup>51</sup> Which is why St Paul in Colossians goes on to say, 'in him all things hold together, and God was pleased to reconcile all things to himself, making peace through the blood of his cross'.

In some way I do not understand, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are God's way of redeeming not only us humans, but 'all things': cockroaches and giraffes, moons and comets, plants and viruses and trees and animals. Salvation is not just about me and my soul, but about the whole of creation. In Hans Küng's wonderful phrase<sup>52</sup>: 'God's kingdom is creation healed.' And so the Christian lives in hope.

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<sup>48</sup> O. M. T. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, IVP, 1986, p.15.

<sup>49</sup> cf. Celia Deane-Drummond, *Creation Through Wisdom*, T & T Clark, 2000, ch.2.

<sup>50</sup> Alan Galloway, *The Cosmic Christ*, Harper, 1951.

<sup>51</sup> Both Elizabeth Johnson (*Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, Bloomsbury, 2014) and Christopher Southgate (*The Groaning of Creation*, John Knox, 2008) have extended discussions on the meaning of the redemption of non-human creatures.

<sup>52</sup> Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, Collins, 1977, p.231.

## n) False hope

Authentic Christian hope is not a blind optimism that everything will work out all right, or indeed the assumption that either God or technology will provide us with a new future to resource us to keep going just as we are. As James Nash rightly puts it, '[Christian eschatology] runs counter to both pessimistic and optimistic views of the future. It cannot and does not provide any guarantee that some form of global or cosmic catastrophe will be averted.'<sup>53</sup> That is not to say that we should not bend every effort, draw on our technical and political skills and exercise personal restraint in our consumer lifestyle, in order as far as possible to avert disaster. But we need a theology that is more robust than the optimistic wish that everything will work out all right. We need a theology that hears the words of judgement the eighth-century BC prophets spoke to God's people when they had abandoned God's ways, and given in to injustice. A theology that recognises that if we continue in the way of sinfulness, stupidity, over-consumption, 'extractivism' and greed, we most likely, and a future generation most certainly, are destined for some catastrophe. A theology that can address the strategies of denial among politicians and those who wield corporate power. A theology that may take us by way of Gethsemane and the cross before we reach Easter, by way of grief and mourning and repentant change, before we celebrate hope. Rather than blind or naive optimism, Christian hope is rather trust in God's faithfulness: that God in love holds on to us in all our uncertainties and that, in ways we do not know, God has a future for God's 'creation project'.

## o) Comfort and lament

Nowhere do God's covenant faithfulness and God's creative purpose come together more obviously than in Isaiah chapters 40 to 55. They begin with the words 'Comfort my people, says your God'. Why?

*The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. (40:12, 28)*

*But now, thus says the LORD who created you ... Fear not for I have redeemed you ... you are precious in my eyes ... and I love you. (Isaiah 43:1, 4)*

Yet this is written after the devastation of the Exile. At that time, others are writing lament:

*How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow she has become, that was great among the nations! ... The tongue of the nursing cleaves to the roof of its mouth for thirst; the children beg for food but no one gives to them. Those who feasted on delicacies perish in the streets; those who were brought up in purple cling to ash heaps. (Lamentations 1:1; 4:4f)*

The prophet Jeremiah even describes the Exile and the destruction of the Temple in terms of the whole of creation falling under divine judgement:

*I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro.*

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<sup>53</sup> James Nash, *Hope for the Earth*, Wipf and Stock, 2000, p.212.

*I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger. For thus says the Lord: The whole land shall be desolation; yet I will not make a full end. (Jeremiah 4:23-27)*

Isaiah himself recognises the lament: ‘all people are grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades’ (Isaiah 40:6). Yet he is nevertheless inspired to hold on in hope: ‘the word of our God will stand for ever’ (Isaiah 40:8).

Isaiah’s faith, despite the uncertainties of exile, is rooted in the steadfast, faithful love of God. ‘The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable’ (Isaiah 40:28). It is the faithfulness of God that is the basis for authentic hope.

### **p) Resurrection hope**

In the closing chapters of the Book of Isaiah, there is a vision of a new heaven and a new earth with human and other animal life together: the Creator makes all things new:

*For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth ... no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping ... they shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit ... the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt or destroy I all my holy mountain, says the LORD. (Isaiah 65:17-25)*

Here the covenant God, who is Creator of heaven and earth, is depicted as ruling over a peaceable kingdom from his holy mountain. The imagery is used again in the Book of Revelation, which also speaks of something ‘new’ as heaven and earth meet in the holy city Jerusalem. It is picked up also by the Second Letter of Peter, where the coming Day of God is described as a ‘new heavens and new earth in which justice dwells’. Justice in the Bible is linked with ‘shalom’. When the Lord brings shalom (which means peace, wellbeing), there is justice for all. This recalls the vision of the psalmists and others of the time when ‘justice and peace shall embrace’ and God’s glory will ‘dwell in our land’ (Psalm 85:9). The glory of God’s presence, which once filled the temple, will one day ‘fill the whole earth’ (Psalm 72:19). The flourishing of shalom includes fulfilment for all and deliverance for the oppressed, indeed the flourishing of all creation.

The ambiguity of the present world – a world in which we grieve and lament, but in which also we hold out a struggling hope in God’s faithfulness – is shown in a remarkable passage in Romans 8:18-25. St Paul writes both of creation groaning in travail, subjected to futility, and yet on the basis of his gospel, he writes confidently of hope, waiting for God’s new world to be born. In the centre of the complex theology of grace which he works out in the Epistle to the Romans, and of God’s reconciliation with sinful humanity through Christ, Paul stands back and looks at a broader vista – the redemption of the whole of creation in God’s purposes. The present world he finds ambiguous – both ‘groaning’ and ‘eager with anticipation’. But his language is of birth – and of a new world coming into being – and that is the source of his hope.

Towards the end of John's Gospel, Mary sees the risen Jesus in the garden on resurrection morning. She does not recognise him, but imagines that he must be the gardener. Tom Wright's comment on this verse is pertinent:

*Mary's intuitive guess, that he must be the gardener, was wrong at one level and right, deeply right, at another. This is the new creation. Jesus is the beginning of it. Remember Pilate: 'Here's the Man!' Here he is: the new Adam, the gardener, charged with bringing the chaos of God's creation into new order, into flower, into fruitfulness. He has come to uproot the thorns and thistles and replace them with blossoms and harvests.<sup>54</sup>*

**q) Transformative action** *From his fullness have we all received grace (John 1:16)*

The Gospel of John points us to Jesus Christ, the embodied Wisdom of God. It then illuminates the 'fullness of life' that comes through union by the Spirit of God with the life of the Risen Christ. That life is the corporate life of branches in the Vine (John 15), or – in the perspective of the Fourth Gospel – what we may call the Community of the Beloved Disciple. In other words, we are talking of the Christian Church, whose unity is well described by the World Council of Churches: 'The unity of the Church, the unity of the human community and the unity of the whole creation are interconnected.'<sup>55</sup> That corporate Church life is elaborated in rich detail in terms of discipleship, described as 'being where Jesus is' (John 17:24), and in terms of mission: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you' (John 20:21).

I have suggested that in the context of climate change the Church's discipleship and mission must include a renewal of our worship – our joy in God and in God's creation; a transformation of our habits of thinking about our human relationship to the rest of God's earth; a reframing of our values and desires; an ethic of neighbour love and justice based on restraint; holding together ecology and economy within God's 'household'; and bearing witness to the light of God's truth in a culture which is living in God's world without acknowledging God.

If that is so, then the invitation – indeed command – to us, is to live now, justly and healthily and sustainably, in the light of the coming of God's kingdom. The 'creation project' lives in eschatological hope.<sup>56</sup> It is after his great chapter about resurrection that St Paul writes: 'Therefore ... in the Lord, your labour is not in vain' (1 Corinthians 15:58). In a context in which it is easy to feel that we are powerless to make any difference at all, we take encouragement from St Paul: in the Lord, your labour is not in vain. God takes up the fragments we offer, and multiplies them, like loaves and fishes, as part of God's 'creation project'.

*Hope in God motivates us to take action that can lead to transformation. Despite the strong probability of very serious effects from global warming, for Christians despair is not an option*

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<sup>54</sup> Tom Wright, *John For Everyone*, Part 2, SPCK, p.146.

<sup>55</sup> World Council of Churches Unity Statement of the 10th Assembly, November 2013, para.13.

<sup>56</sup> There is a whole issue of *Anvil* (Vol. 29.1, September 2013) given to 'Environment and Hope'.

*... We are called to live and work with hope in response to God's gift, and in the light of God's future: the promised coming of Christ's reign over all. (The Ash Wednesday Declaration)*

## 8. Conclusion: towards transformative action

Much Christian theology has become virtually overtaken by the view that salvation is essentially something to do with our individual souls, and our journey to heaven. What has got lost is the truth of the redemption of all things in Christ, the Wisdom of God in whom all things hold together, in whom all things are reconciled to God, and in whom heaven and earth are joined. We need to recover the way of Wisdom, the way of cross and resurrection, love and service, sacrifice and restraint, and the corporate life of the Spirit. This is our human responsibility as God's image-bearers, in union with Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is also the pathway to human flourishing and the healing of all creation. To follow Colin Gunton again: people, society and all created beings can only find their true life, fulfilment and wellbeing, when they become part of Christ's offering of all things through the Spirit to the Father.<sup>57</sup>

Can climate change provoke us into transformative action – into a different way of living, informed by God's way of Wisdom? Can climate change be the trigger both for a rethinking of our desires and how to value them in the light of God's Wisdom, and for the costly discipleship that will entail? Can it help us to learn, in the light of God's call, what it will entail, in the present environmental crisis, to live justly and to love our neighbours throughout creation? Can climate change provoke us into recovering our human calling under God as bearers of God's image in responsible care for God's creation?

The urgency of the task is not only underscored by science, but also required by the gospel.

*O God, who set before us the great hope that your Kingdom shall come on earth and taught us to pray for its coming: give us grace to discern the signs of its dawning and to work for the perfect day when the whole world shall reflect your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

(a prayer of Percy Dearmer, used by Operation Noah in the Ash Wednesday Declaration  
[www.operationnoah.org](http://www.operationnoah.org))

## THE AUTHOR

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<sup>57</sup> cf. Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, Cambridge, 1993.

## ABOUT OPERATION NOAH

Operation Noah is an ecumenical Christian charity providing leadership, focus and inspiration in response to the growing threat of catastrophic climate change. Full details here:

<http://operationnoah.org>

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Founded in 2002, Ekklesia is a public policy think-tank that explores the changing nature of the relationship between politics and beliefs in a plural world. Committed to social justice, peacemaking, environmental sustainability and new economy, it seeks to combine transformative Christian thinking about public life with ideas and insights from a range of allies beyond the Christian tradition.

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